


THREE LETTERS FROM
HENRY JAMES TO JOSEPH CONRAD

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1926

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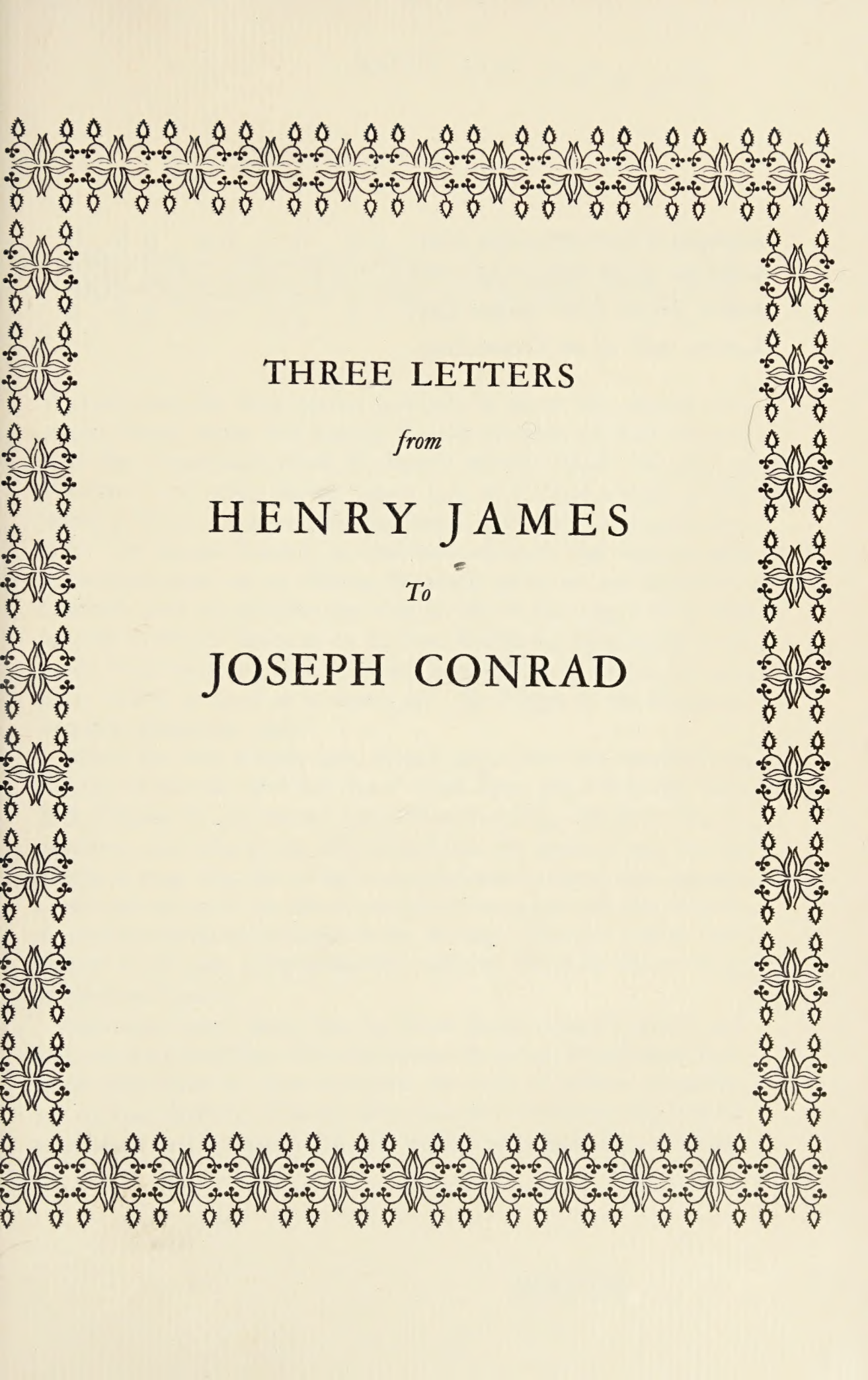
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A decorative border of repeating floral motifs, resembling stylized flowers or leaves, surrounds the central text.

THREE LETTERS

from

HENRY JAMES

To

JOSEPH CONRAD

PS2123.A5 1926

*220 copies of these letters from Henry
James to Joseph Conrad have been
printed for the First Edition Club,
London, 1926, at the Curwen Press.*



ALTHOUGH the date cannot precisely be fixed, the relations between Henry James and Joseph Conrad certainly go back to very near the commencement of the latter's literary career. So early as February 11th, 1897, Henry James sent to Conrad a copy of *The Spoils of Poynton*, then recently published, with the following dedication: 'To Joseph Conrad, in dreadfully delayed, but very grateful acknowledgment of an offering singularly generous and beautiful.' Conrad's own recollection was that it was in the course of a visit he paid to Henry James at 13 de Vere Mansions, Kensington (now 34 de Vere Gardens), that he found, in a volume of Pepys, the sentence which he used as a motto for *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, issued in December 1897.

When the two writers met, Henry James had just resumed the writing of novels, after five years' work upon plays that met with little success; he had rented Lamb House at Rye, which he was to purchase soon afterwards, and wherefrom, for twelve years, he was hardly to stray. The first of his letters to Conrad printed here belongs to the time when he was almost exclusively engaged with the preparation of the Collected Edition of his writings. The two others were written in the year of his seventieth birthday, when he was working at *The Ivory Tower*.

Although Henry James was, by fifteen years, Conrad's senior, and had written a long line of books before the latter had achieved one, there arose between them relations, not only of artistic sympathy, but of true affection. Conrad never ceased to maintain the keenest admiration and sympathy for the work and personality of Henry

James; and these letters from the older writer to the younger are particularly precious for the reason that no letters to Conrad were included in the selection of Henry James's correspondence edited by Mr. Percy Lubbock. In that selection, reference to Conrad is made twice; and, on each occasion, in a letter to Mr. H. G. Wells written in 1902. The first reference is that 'Conrad haunts Winchelsea and Winchelsea (in discretion) haunts Rye'; the second explains that Henry James had shown to Conrad 'a shorter statement of *The Wings of the Dove*'—a testimony of confidence in Conrad's judgement.

LAMB HOUSE · RYE

November 1st, 1906

My dear Conrad,

I have taught you that I am lumbering and long, but I haven't, I think, yet taught you that I am base, and it is not on the occasion of your beautiful sea green volume of the other day that I shall consent to begin. I read you as I listen to rare music—with deepest depths of surrender, and out of those depths I emerge slowly and reluctantly again to acknowledge that I return to life. To taste you as I do taste you is really thus to wander far away and to decently thank you is a postal transaction (quite another affair), for which I have to come back, and accept with a long sad sigh the community of our afflicted existence. My silence is thus—after your beautiful direct speech to me too—but that I ['ve] been away with you, intimately and delightfully and my only objection to writing to you in gratitude is that I am not reading you, but quite the contrary, when I do it. But I have you now, and the charm of this process of appropriation has been to me, with your adorable book for its subject, of the very greatest. And I am touched in the same degree by the grace of your inscription, all so beautifully said and so generously felt. J'en suis tout confus, my dear Conrad, and can only thank you and thank you again. But the book itself is a wonder to me really—for it's so bringing home the prodigy of your past experiences: bringing it home to me more personally and directly, I mean, the immense treasure and the inexhaustible adventures. No one has known—for intellectual use—the things you know, and you have, as the artist of the whole matter, an authority that no one has approached. I find you in it all, writing wonderfully, whatever you may say of your difficult medium and your plume rebelle. You knock about in the wide waters of expression like the raciest and boldest of privateers,—you have made the whole place your own en même temps que les droits les plus acquis vous y avez les plus rares bonheurs. Nothing you have done has more in it. The root of the matter of saying. You stir me, in fine, to amazement and you touch me to tears, and I thank the powers who so mysteriously let you

loose with such sensibilities, into such an undiscovered country—for sensibility. That is all for to-night. I want to see you again. Is Winchelsea a closed book?

Are the Ford Madoxes still away? (What a world they must then have been let loose into!) I am looking for some sign of them, and with it perhaps some more contemporary news of you. I hope the smaller boy is catching up, and your wife reasserting herself and your 'condition' favourable? Ah, one's conditions! But we must make them, and you have, on every showing, de quoi! I pat you, my dear Conrad, very affectionately and complacently on the back and am yours very constantly

HENRY JAMES

P.S.—Milles amitiés to the fireside and the crib.

June 19th, 1913

My dear Conrad,

I always knew you were a shining angel, and now, under this fresh exhibition of your dazzling moral radiance (to say nothing of the other sorts), my natural impulse, you see, is to take advantage of these sublime qualities in you up to the very hilt. Thus it is that I throw myself upon the use of this violent machinery for at last, and in all humility, approaching you; because I feel that you will feel how I must have some pretty abject personal reason for it. That reason, to deal with it in a word, is simply that, having so miserably, so helplessly failed to do what I was, during all the dreadful time, unspeakably yearning to— which was neither more nor less than to get again into nearer relation with you by some employment, however awkward, of hand or foot—I now leave each of these members as just damnably discredited and disgraced, and seek the aid of nimbler and younger and more vivid agents than my own compromised ‘personality’ has proved itself able to set in motion. In other (and fewer) words, I just sit here muffled in shame for the absolute doom of silence—in all sorts of other directions too than the beautiful Kentish, and the insidiously Polish, and the triumphantly otherwise magistrale—that, beginning, horrible to think, something like four years ago at least, was so long to disfigure the fair face of my general and constitutional good intention. For the moment I merely lift the edge of this crimson veil of contrition to say to you, peeping, as it were, from under it, that I don’t despair of helping you to lift it almost altogether off me when once we shall really be within mutual reach. I am better, and therefore a shade braver, than at any even of the more mitigated moments of my dismal and long-drawn recent record; and, though handicapped by a particular chronic ailment that leaves me scant margin and reminds me too often, with crude violence, of my mortality, am getting again (absit omen!) a decenter use of my poor residuum, whatever it may yet prove, than for many a troubled day. Thus, please gently understand that one of my very first applications of this fact will

be to let you know of my achieved installation again at Rye. I hear with fond awe of your possession of a (I won't say life-saving, but literally life-making) miraculous car, the most dazzling element for me in the whole of your rosy legend. Perhaps you will indeed again, some July afternoon, turn its head to Lamb House, and to yours, my dear Conrad, and your Wife's, all far more faithfully than you can lately have believed even by whatever stretch of ingenuity,

HENRY JAMES

LAMB HOUSE · RYE · SUSSEX

October 13th, 1913

My dear Conrad,

Will you conceive of me as approaching you as the most abject of worms, most contrite of penitents, most misrepresented—by hideous appearances—of all the baffled well-meaning and all the frustrated fond? If I could but see you for an hour all would become plain, and I should wring your heart with my true and inward history. My conditions for a long time past have been fatal to all initiative—through being so lost to all confidence (in myself), though that, I am happy to say, is coming back little by little—and hence this reaching out to you in the suppliant's flat-on-my-belly, the crawling with-my-nose-in-the-dust, posture. You will say that if I had no confidence in myself for so long I might at least have had a little in you—especially after your generous signal to me by your afternoon call of some weeks, horribly many weeks, ago. You will be able to say nothing, however, that will reduce me to softer pulp than I already desire to present to you every symptom of, so don't try to be any more overwhelmingly right than I myself utterly see you: ce serait tellement enfoncer une porte ouverte! Only do this, if you mercifully and magnanimously can: come over to luncheon with me, by an heroic effort—and believe that I shall thereby bless you to the (perhaps not very distant) end of my days. If you tell me that this is impossible through the extremity of inconvenience, I will then arrange—that is, heaven forgive me! propose and aspire to—something less onerous to you; but do let me hear from you by 9 bare words, that I haven't too fatally forfeited your indulgence, and that you will further consider. I attribute to you the fine facility of a motor-car—'I had written care and might have left it, mightn't I?'—yet if you ask me what that has to do with the question, my reply can only be that I will recklessly procure one for the occasion myself and go over to see you at home.

There are trains too, rather happily available; but, in fine, it isn't for me to teach you. The point is that if you had, so very comprehensibly, rather not come again, I shall place myself all at your service for the natural alternative. I do

so want to see you, and to tell you, and to convince you, and to harrow you up. That is all for to-night. I have sat up to the small hours thus to engage you; and I am, my dear Conrad, with every invocation of your generosity and of your Wife's intercession for me (I bless her in advance on it),

Your all faithfully,

HENRY JAMES

P.S. Any day after this week that you may kindly name for luncheon and if you can stay your stomach to 1.45.

Date Due

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James, Henry

Three letters from Henry James
to Joseph Conrad.

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